

Breeding Rare Finches

by Terry Dunham
Florida

Jim Hulsey, of Fort Worth, Texas, can shatter a lot of your illusions about the successful breeding of rare finches.

It's not just that he succeeds: it's the way he does it.

Breeders who are willing to consider new alternatives, however, will quickly get over their shock and begin considering Hulsey's methods. He'd be the last to tell anyone to do it his way just because it works for him: "One of my basic rules," he told Watchbird, "is that if you're satisfied with your results, don't change your methods." Most breeders are always looking for ways to improve, however, and that's where Hulsey's techniques come in.

He didn't develop his breeding program by choice.

"I work long hours during every January and February," he says: "I leave home before daylight and get home after dark. During those two months I must do all feeding, watering, fostering and banding in the course of one day — usually Sunday. From Sunday to Sunday the birds are on their own."

It's not hard to imagine the problems this would impose. Most breeders dally in their bird rooms daily, even as they try to economize on the time they MUST spend there.

Imagine Hulsey's dilemma. He has 35 pair of society finches in individual cages; 30 larger cages for the "exotic" species; more than a dozen larger holding pens and small flights.

He equipped all but the flights with automatic waterers. The flights have "drip" waterers which Hulsey notes "frequently stop dripping" and contain poultry waterers for backup sources of drinking water.

Every cage and flight also has some sort of seed hopper that holds about a two week supply of seed, plus containers for grit.

These arrangements are sufficient for life support but would obviously be insufficient for breeding in all but the most fortunate of instances. A supplemental food was needed, Hulsey knew. Egg-based foods, he also knew, might spoil if left unattended for a full week. In the absence of such a supplement, Hulsey says, "Diamond Sparrows, stars, and the like would occasionally fledge a clutch of young but more often than not the young were weak and sickly."

Two of Hulsey's friends in San Antonio, Ben Pawlik and Tom Hardgrave, urged Hulsey to try an imaginative solution, one that breeders in Texas and many other states are now using with consistent results: dry dog food.

It can be kept before the birds at all times; it contains animal protein; and it contains vitamins. Hulsey uses this formulation:

- 80% ground dog chow (Purina)
- 5% powdered gelatin
- 5% brewers yeast
- 5% Vionate (Squibb)
- 5% high protein cereal (Gerber)

The hardest part, he confesses, "was grinding the dog food." He burned up two blenders before buying a commercial coffee grinder from a bankrupt cafe, and finds it functions well. Friends tell him Purina's "Puppy Chow" grinds much more easily, and is higher in protein. "Too high?" Hulsey wonders.

Getting the birds to eat the mix was also a challenge. It was nearly untouched by his birds for months, until suddenly it began disappearing in large quantities. He first suspected mice. Then a pair of diamond sparrows fledged five "huge, healthy babies." Since then, he says, "all the finches eat it and feed their babies. It's been that way for more than 10 years now."

Don't be afraid to add to or delete from the mixture, he says, but be cautious: he once added alfalfa to a 25-pound batch and had to discard the whole batch because his birds would not touch it. The mixture must be stored in air-tight containers if prepared in bulk: it will absorb moisture when humidity is high.

Breeders whose birds are already eating an alternative supplement can switch to this mixture by mixing it in slowly increasing amounts to their present food. Once the birds have apparently accepted it, gradually reduce the amount of the original components until they are eliminated or to the level you desire.

Using his new foodstuff, Hulsey had found that he can complete his weekly care for his birds in six hours — "if I do not stop too often for an extra cup of coffee." The habits created in the winter are carried over into the remainder of the year: though he often has more time to work with the birds, he sticks to his Sunday-only care and on other days does no more than brief

"walk-throughs" to assure himself everything is normal.

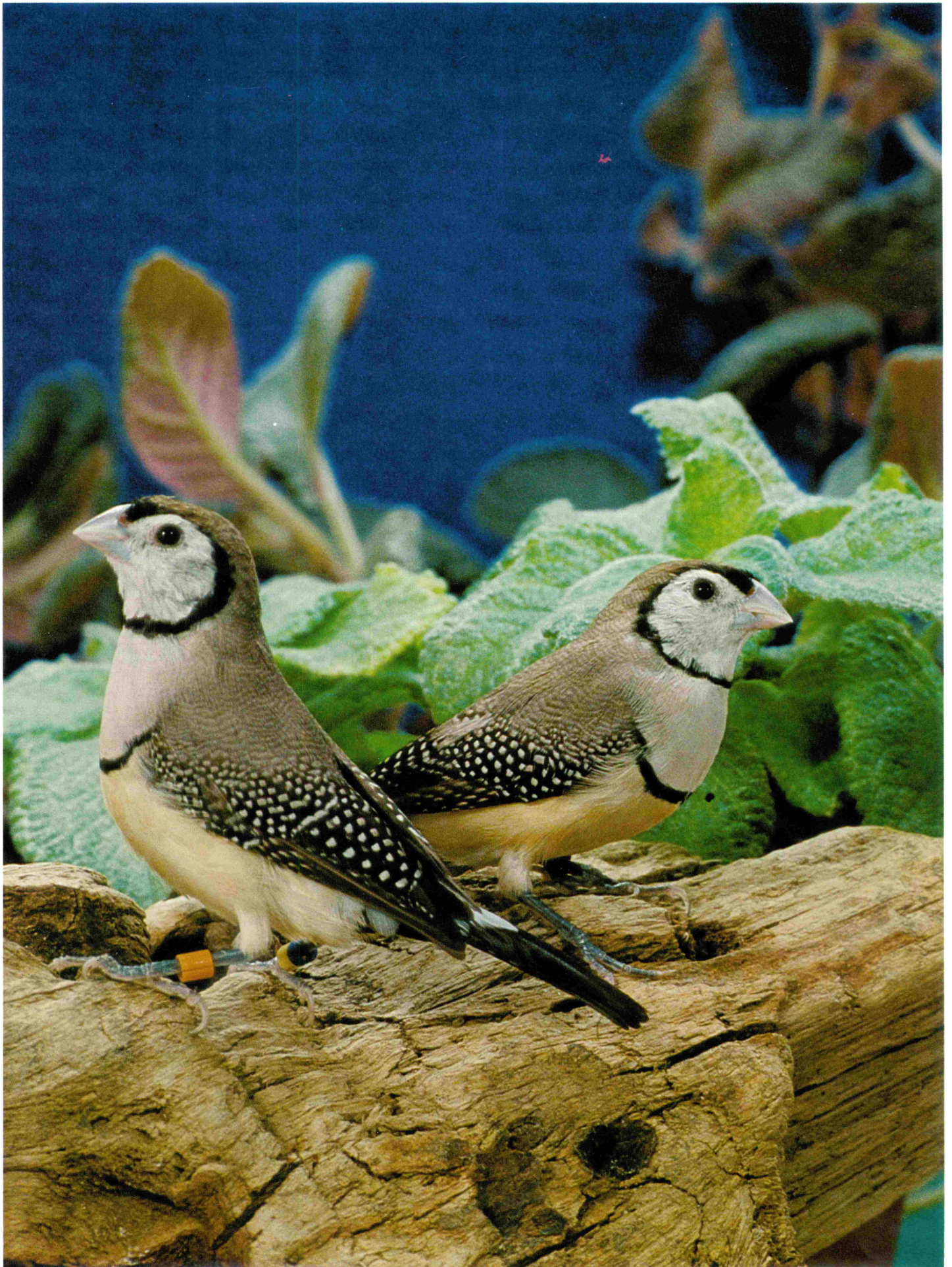
He has carefully considered the other needs of any birdkeeper, too, and concludes that it is "amazing how few items are actually required for keeping and breeding finches, other than the enclosure and water. In addition to seed, grit and his dogfood supplement, he lists these items: 5% Sevin dust; Shell pest strips; coastal burmuda hay; Tramisol (18.2% for worming birds); Principen 250 (for medication); and hardware including trash can, broom and dustpan; a pair of large shears; a piece of tin for scraping trays; a seed recycler and a pair of finger-nail clippers.

He uses the Tramisol 6 cc/gallon of drinking water and treats his birds for a week because of his schedule, though 48 hours is considered adequate. Half of the very young in nests may be lost during treatment, and most pairs of breeders will lay an infertile clutch in their next nest, but he believes the treatment is an important part of maintaining healthy birds.

The Principen 250 is used ½ teaspoon of powder to ½ pint of water. He treats a sick bird for no more than four days, takes it off treatment for four, then treats four more days if necessary. (The medicine, a penicillin derivative, is good for only 48 hours after activated with water.) It tastes and smells like Kool-Aid, Hulsey says; some medications are bitter and birds won't drink water containing them.

Hulsey fosters all his birds eggs to society finches, with the exception of those laid during the hottest summer months, when he rests his societies. He prefers young society pairs; they are first tested with Diamond Sparrow eggs. Those that raise them successfully, he says, are "priceless." Interestingly, he finds Gould, Zebra and Parrot Finch young the easiest to foster; Diamond Sparrows and Owl Finches, he says, have proven the most difficult in his experience, which may not parallel the experience of other breeders.

For some aviculturists, the dog food supplement may represent a major breakthrough. Others may choose not to use it, just as not all breeders would follow Hulsey's practice of not feeding greens regularly because he can't during the two winter months. "Don't change your methods if you're satisfied with the results," he stresses. Clearly, however, his program works for him, and it is the result of that breeding season 10 years ago when, he says, "I wasn't satisfied." AFA members may or may not mimic the specifics of his plan, but they would all be well advised to imitate the open-minded attitude he brings to the challenge of breeding rare finches.



Pair owl finches. Photo by Margaret Perry. First place winner 1979 Photo Contest.